ROUGHLY 15,000 YEARS AGO a 3,000-foot-thick glacier stretched across Puget Sound from the Olympic Mountains on the west to the Cascade Mountains on the east. As it melted and retreated northward, it sculpted Bellevue’s smooth hills and scoured out the two lakes that flank it—Lake Washington on the west and Lake Sammamish on the east—settling the city amid hills and water and soaring mountain ranges.

When white settlers first explored the area in the mid-1800s, rich soil nourished thick, lush forests. The region’s Salish Indians, called Hah-tshu-ab’sh, or “lake people,” had a settlement near Factoria, and they hunted and gathered food in the dense forested areas of Bellevue and fished along the lakes. In the century after those first settlers cleared land, Bellevue’s character shifted dramatically from wild country to metropolitan city. Much of that development is evident in the landscape and neighborhoods today.

MEYDENBAUER BAY
William Meydenbauer claimed land for a summer home near what’s now Meydenbauer Bay [right] in 1889. Today, Meydenbauer Beach Park [above] and Clyde Beach Park provide swimming areas, but in the late 1800s, ox teams dragged so many logs to the bay it probably looked as if you could walk across water. The American Pacific Whaling Company moved its headquarters to Bellevue in 1919, wintering boats in Meydenbauer Bay.

INTO THE WILD
In 1869 Aaron Mercer and his wife, Ann Mercer, claimed land along what is now known as Mercer Slough Nature Park [left in 1925]. At that time, the slough stretched from what is now Main Street past Coal Creek, south of I-90. The area was so wild that the mysterious rustling sounds Mercer’s wife heard at their door on several occasions turned out to be a cougar.
FARMLAND ROOTS
In 1904 Sakutaro Takami planted a strawberry field at 102nd Ave NE and NE 15th St—now a neighborhood. By 1925 the area was so berry bountiful that residents held the first Strawberry Festival (right), and by 1935 some 15,000 people were feasting the local produce. Seven years later, though, the festival faced a crisis when local Japanese families—who had farmed more than 450 acres here—were sent to internment camps. The festival ended in 1942 only to begin again in 1987. It is now held annually the fourth weekend in June.

A SCHOOL IS BUILT
In 1882 settler Albert Burrows [right] built a home on 160 acres at Beaux Arts and began rowing to Seattle for work. The house [below in 1895] burned in 1925; the homestead cabin survived and is now a private residence. In 1883 Burrows built the Eastside’s first public school, saving young children the often dangerous trip across Lake Washington to school. (Most high-schoolers still attended school in Seattle until 1909.)

“Today, the Heritage Trail winds around a portion of the 320-acre Mercer Slough Nature Park, providing a close look at wetland plants and animals and a glimpse of the downtown skyline from the largest remaining wetland on Lake Washington.
COMMUNITY EMERGES
By the early 1900s churches were sprouting up to serve Bellevue’s growing population. The first in the area—the First Community Church, built in 1901—is gone, but two others still stand: the First Baptist Church, built in 1905, and the Sacred Heart Church (right), built in 1926, which is now home to a health care practice.

Bellevue incorporated in 1953 with a population of just under 6,000 and roughly five square miles. It grew tenfold in the two decades following its incorporation to become the fourth-largest city in Washington in 1970.

TEN & NOW
Visit any of these places for a firsthand look at Bellevue’s evolution. For more information about the city’s history and natural heritage, contact the Eastside Heritage Center: 425-450-1049, or eastsideheritagecenter.org.

The 1920s Sharp Cabin, a.k.a. the Cottonwood House, is now located at the Bellevue Botanical Gardens, 12001 Main St
Bellevue Community College 3000 Landerholm Circle SE
Bellevue Square NE Eighth St and 106th Ave NE
Clyde Beach Park 2 92nd Ave NE
Frederick W. Winters House 2102 Bellevue Way SE
First Baptist Church 257 100th Ave NE
Kelsey Creek Park 410 130th Pl SE
Lincoln Square skyscraper 700 Bellevue Way NE
Mercer Slough Nature Park 2102 Bellevue Way SE

REVIVAL STYLE
The Heritage Trail in the Mercer Slough Nature Park wends past the 1929 Mission and Spanish Revival-style Frederick W. Winters House (left in 1945), which was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1992.
GROWTH SPURTS
When Bellevue Square [right] opened in 1946, a shopping center with food, entertainment, and goods all in one complex—and designed for people in autos—was a novel idea. Bel-Vue Theatre, with seats for 960, was the first business to open in the square; Frederick & Nelson served as the first anchor store. Today, Seattle-based Nordstrom has one of its largest stores here. The one-story, open-air mall quickly drew large numbers and even attracted Seattleites, a trend that continues today. Over the past 66 years the mall has transformed into a covered shopping center.

ACCESS GRANTED
When the original Lacey V. Murrow Memorial Bridge [left] opened in 1940 and connected Seattle to the Eastside, Bellevue became so accessible that the following year Boeing opened a production facility 10 miles south of Bellevue in Renton.

BIG BUSINESS
In 1969, truck designer and manufacturer PACCAR moved its headquarters to the Business Center Building [right in 1969], occupying two and a half floors of what was then the city’s tallest building. Today the largest Fortune 500 company headquartered in Bellevue, PACCAR occupies all of what is now the PACCAR building.